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SUBJECT: RUSSIA-GEORGIA RELATIONS

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons 1,4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) Summary. Russia is in no hurry to re-evaluate its bilateral relations with Georgia, with the MFA issuing repeated statements slamming Saakashvili's anti-Russia tactics as a "farce." MFA officials confirm that Saakashvili is persona non grata in Moscow, while Duma Chairman Gryzlov raised the diplomatic temperature by promising to consider recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence in January (although previous Duma deliberations have not entailed any GOR steps towards recognition). Russian experts downplay prospects for a diplomatic improvement given the burden of recent history, the Saakashvili factor, Georgia's need for an external enemy during a difficult domestic period, and the U.S. role in advancing Georgia's ambitions, and the Kosovo "precedent." How Russia responds to Kosovo's expected UDI remains a wild card in its relations with Georgia. End summary.

Official Views

¶2. (C) Since November 7, the MFA has issued repeated tough statements about Georgia, especially in response to Saakashvili's accusation that the GOR was behind Georgia's opposition demonstrations. The GOR termed Saakashvili's anti-Russia tactics a "farce," and repeatedly predicted that the upcoming elections, conducted in an atmosphere of "Russophobia" and intimidation of the opposition could not be free and fair. Prior to his November 30 meeting with Georgian FM Bezhuashvili, FM Lavrov accused Saakashvili in an interview with the weekly magazine "Itogi," for attempting to use Russia as a scapegoat in "justifying" his domestic and foreign policy failures. Lavrov maintained that the GOR is tired of the pattern that has the Georgian leadership declare its readiness to put the bilateral relationship back on a normal track, then resort to anti-Russia provocations when the GOR replies with concrete steps for the normalization. Lavrov criticized "Western sponsors" of Georgia for a "double standard" that has them acquiescing to Saakashvili's wrongdoings, but quick to point the finger at every alleged Russian misstep.

¶3. (C) MFA Regional Conflict Division Chief Aleksey Dvinyanin told us that Saakashvili's latest anti-Russia rhetoric had made him unwelcome in Moscow. A meeting with Putin was a remote possibility without concrete, positive steps by the GOG. Russia's Special Envoy for the South Ossetian conflict, Ambassador Yuriy Popov echoed the same sentiment, noting that "Saakashvili is well beyond getting under our skin." Both agreed that if Georgia continued down its anti-Russia path, little improvement in bilateral relations would be possible.

¶4. (U) On December 3, while basking in the warm glow of a Duma election victory, United Russia Chairman Boris Gryzlov informed the press that the new Duma would consider in

January Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's appeals for independence. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, whose "Russian passport holders" enthusiastically supported United Russia at the December 2 Duma election, have already sent the results of their referenda -- held in 1999 and 2006 respectively -- to the Duma, Gryzlov said. (Note: Similar Duma promises in November and December 2006 to South Ossetian and Abkhaz requests for recognition did not entail any concrete GOR steps toward recognition.)

What Moscow Experts Say

15. (U) The vast majority of Russian experts support GOR actions and statements on Georgia: Saakashvili's Georgia does not deserve Russia's "generosity.". Only a (small) handful of liberals at the Institute of Europe and the Moscow Carnegie Center argue that Russia should stop talking the double talk -- respect for the Georgian territorial integrity but no GOR plan for a "hands off" policy. At the other end of the think tank spectrum, the CIS Institute supports immediate recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. All agreed that it is a pity that the two nations with such deep historical, cultural binds, cannot get along. Moscow analysts argue that the following factors have shaped Russia-Georgia bilateral relations:

-- Too Much History:

16. (C) Moscow laments the dynamic established in the '90s, when Georgia began to move precipitously away from Russia. Moscow State Institute of International Relations' (MGIMO) Vladimir Degoyev thought that the dispute with Georgia was a metaphor for Russia's basic ambivalence toward the West, while the continuing series of GOR - GOG altercations were a reflection of Russia's failed adjustment to its new neighbors. Georgia's decision to look west only exacerbated Russia's lack of self confidence. The West's failure to understand Russia's historical ambivalence about the West and fears of unstable borders increase Russia's nervous tics toward Georgia, which has become a hostage in Russia's search for its own identity.

--- Saakashvili and His Young Team:

17. (C) The color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia were difficult for Russia to absorb. Since then, Russia has learned from its mistakes during the Orange Revolution and has established manageable relations with Ukraine; it even kept contacts at all levels and with all parties active during the Ukrainian political crisis earlier this year. Georgia is a different story. Many attribute failed relations to the Saakashvili factor and Russia's policy mistakes. Moscow Carnegie Center's Aleksey Malashenko thought that the GOR should have been more forthcoming when Saakashvili reached out to Putin in the years after the Rose Revolution, instead of resorting to what Malashenko termed the "bully" policies of a trade embargo and the suspension of direct flights between the two countries.

18. (C) Many commentators here regard Saakashvili as impulsive and immature -- ill-suited to lead Georgia. His under-40 team is a "generation fitted with a new matrix which has no memory of the past," according to Fedor Lukyanov Editor-in-Chief of Russia in Global Affairs.

--- Saakashvili's Plight, Russia's Schadenfreude:

19. (C) Many specialists said that Russia does not need a problem in Georgia, which they consider a weak "non-state" that is crippled by the labor drain to Russia and a population decline. Experts are quick to recall the many ethnic fault lines among that already diminished population. If Saakashvili had underestimated the opposition; Moscow experts were also surprised at the magnitude of discontent demonstrated by the huge turnout at anti-government demonstrations. In the aftermath of the political crisis in Tbilisi, Russian officials and experts barely hid their

contempt for Saakashvili's attempt to find an external cause for his domestic problems after the beatings of opposition demonstrators, and the closure of an independent television station. Popov said Saakashvili's mismanagement gave life to the Georgian opposition, which was otherwise a non-entity, a "still-born child." Now that the mask was off, Saakashvili had been revealed as just another post-Soviet power-hungry corrupt leader, he added.

---"Misguided" U.S. Policy:

¶10. (C) At a time when the Russian public is inclined to see the U.S. and the West as Russia's enemy, every USG move in Georgia is closely watched. Our MFA contacts are convinced that the U.S. advised Saakashvili to pick an early election date in order to interdict opposition efforts to mobilize. For the Russian media and public, the USG's reaction to Saakashvili's November 7 crackdown of opposition demonstrators and the closure of the opposition T.V. station, "Imedi" was too mild and came too late. The USG "double standard" was the buzz word here when the President issued a strong statement about Gary Kasparov's arrest and the GOR treatment of opposition demonstrations in Moscow. The feud between Saakashvili and former Georgian Defense Minister Okruashvili represents for many experts the tip of an iceberg of corruption and intrigue.

--- The Consequences of Kosovo:

¶11. (C) Practically everyone we talked to thought that Kosovo would be seen as a precedent in the Caucasus. Sergey Markedonov of the Institute for Military and Strategic Analysis said that one could argue endlessly about whether Kosovo is unique or universal, but "if Kosovo is unique, so is Abkhazia; if Kosovo is universal, so is Abkhazia." According to MGIMO's Aleksey Bogaturov, the West applies "dualism" and attempts to impose a semantic argument on Russia and the rest of the world for reasons of political expediency. Lukaynov predicted that even if the GOR does not react to the West's recognition of Kosovo independence with immediate recognition of Abkhazia, it will constantly remind the U.S. of its "mistakes." Whatever Saakashvili might think, for many, Abkhazia is lost forever for Georgia and Saakashvili has to come to terms with the loss. The Institute of Oriental Studies' Vitaliy Naumkin suggested that as a response to Kosovo, the GOR drastically increase its economic cooperation with Abkhazia and establish a Russian representative office a la the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) without officially recognizing Abkhazia. Ekho Moskv Editor Aleksey Venediktov related a December 4 conversation with the Foreign Minister, in which Lavrov argued against recognition and symmetrical responses but concluded, "I am in the minority,"

--- Come January 5, 2008:

¶12. (C) No one in Moscow doubts that Saakashvili will be re-elected on January 5, and the belief is widespread that his continuation in power spells further trouble for Russia-Georgia relations. They consider that reconciliation is not amenable to deadlines and Saakashvili's wiser choice would make Georgia more attractive in order to keep the breakaway areas with Georgia. Many felt that "freezing" the conflict would be better than a drastic move that could ignite another ethnic war. In the meantime, Russians are quietly engaging in trade with Abkhazians. Abkhazian mandarins, persimmons and other produce are regular sights in Moscow markets despite the official line that the CIS sanctions against Abkhazia are in force. Many argue against the costs of supporting "unrecognized" territories and advise a more liberal business atmosphere and efforts to initiate grassroots interaction.

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